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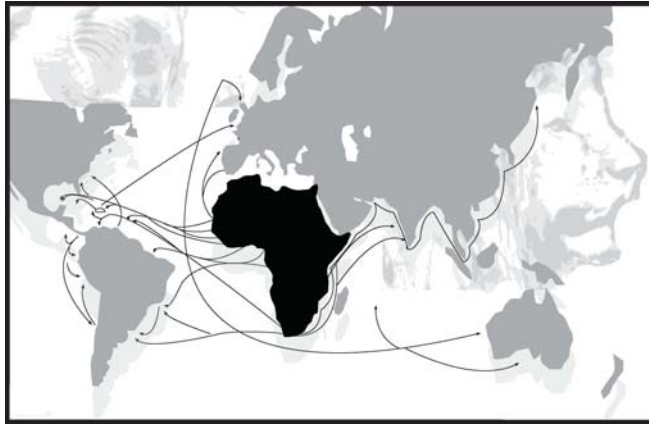
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*The Cultural Politics of Paul Robeson and Richard Wright:  
Theorizing the African Diaspora*

*(Working Paper 007)*

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## **Abstract**

“The Cultural Politics of Paul Robeson and Richard Wright: Theorizing the African Diaspora”

Confronted with the task of defining what it meant to be black in an anti-black world, early cultural critics faced intellectual, existential, and political challenges. This paper focuses on how Paul Robeson and Richard Wright met these challenges in the post-World War Two period. The author explores the way that Robeson and Wright’s biographies and writings shed light on the ambiguities inherent in theorizing the African Diaspora.

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## **Introduction**

Much has been written about the cultural politics of early Black American creative intellectuals. In his widely referenced essay, “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” Cornel West (1990) asserts that in any given historical moment, creative intellectuals are confronted with the profound crisis of their time. For West, the most important crisis of contemporary society is what he calls “the misrepresentation and marginalization of the Other by powerful social institutions.” In a “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy”—to use bell hooks’ (1994) term for interlocking structures of domination in America—unwanted individuals and groups can find themselves oppressed and excluded from the power, profits, privileges, and pleasures that white, wealthy, and straight men enjoy. For West, this is the new cultural politics of difference that should challenge and dismantle these forms of cultural domination.

West identifies three challenges that creative intellectuals face during their particular moments of crisis: intellectual, existential, and political challenges. The intellectual challenge was how the cultural critic responded, at least in terms of proposals put forward, to the crisis of the period. The existential challenge was how the creative intellectual acquired the self-confidence, discipline, and perseverance necessary for success without an undue reliance on the mainstream approval and acceptance. The political challenge was that of making relevant to the larger society one’s intellectual engagements by forming alliances with, and utilizing, those non-state organizations whose sole purpose was to agitate and advocate on behalf of the dispossessed masses.

West argues that in their effort to universalize, homogenize, or essentialize Black humanity, post-World War II creative intellectuals betrayed Black people by accepting prevailing white norms in their defense of Black humanity. According to West, early Black cultural critics should have been concerned about drawing attention to the categories of Black specificity or diversity—ideology, class, gender, and sexual orientation. One could scarcely question West’s admiration for the anti-racist sensibilities of the early Black creative intellectuals. Nevertheless, West’s criticism seems to miss the mark, as an exploration of the intellectual activism of Paul Robeson and Richard Wright will demonstrate.

The broad purpose of this paper is to examine the cultural politics of Paul Robeson and Richard Wright. How did these early creative artists, as intellectual warriors, confront the task of defining what it meant to be Black in white supremacist and anti-Black world? Engaged in the process of cultural projection and cultural change (see Merelman, 1995), Robeson and Wright, along with a generation of Black creative intellectuals, struggled to overturn traditional images of Blacks and to place new images of their people before a racist society. Hence, Robeson and Wright, like other early Black intellectual warriors, were forced to fight in order to legitimize the very humanity of Black people, as such.

While Paul Robeson (1898-1976) had a lower middle-class upbringing in Princeton, New Jersey, and Westfield, New Jersey, Richard Wright (1908-1960) came from the most impoverished of peasant circumstances in Natchez, Mississippi. Robeson received a stellar education, eventually graduating from Rutgers University as a leading student-athlete. Wright did not have a high school diploma. Although Robeson never joined the Communist Party USA, Wright did; both men were widely regarded intellectual activists and cultural critics, who engaged in radical politics on behalf of the liberation of Black people in Africa and in America. As an actor, singer, and scholar, Robeson became the most controversial Black figure in America and the most widely known around the world during the 1930s and 1940s. As a writer of fiction and non-fiction during the same period, Wright almost single-handedly created new, progressive, and assertive images of Black people that challenged traditional racist stereotypes. Both men left America for a period of time. Robeson eventually returned with hope and optimism in the USA; Wright became a permanent exile in Paris after World War II, considering white supremacist America beyond redemption. Although Robeson saw himself as a son of Africa, Wright considered himself a Black man who was the displaced offspring of the modern West. Significantly, both men were knowledgeable, powerful, and courageous.

Robeson and Wright emerged as major Black intellectual warriors who were driven by the quest to defend Black humanity against the cultural domination of white supremacist ideas and practices. Much has been written about their relationship with the Communist Party—Wright joined the organization but Robeson did not--and their

concomitant struggle to cope with the realities of Black Nationalism. Of additional significance were Robeson and Wright's adversarial internationalism (efforts to organize alliances in order to challenge the dominant discourse and practice of Western cultural imperialism) and the attempt to theorize the complex relationship between Black America and Africa. Not only were Robeson and Wright confronted with interpreting the meaning of blackness in anti-Black America, but they also found themselves trying to probe the meaning of Africa to Black Americans at a time when white Americans and Europeans defined Black people, generally, as subhuman and primitive. How did Robeson and Wright come to grips with this intellectual and practical problem?

In what follows, I want, first, to explore Robeson's conceptions of Black Nationalism and African Nationalism and his organizational engagement in Diaspora politics on behalf of African liberation, which linked the system of US racism to the structure of racist colonialism in Africa. Second, I want to probe Wright's conception of outsider consciousness, along with his vision of the modern world and the complex problem between tradition and modernization relative of Africa. Through this examination, what will emerge is a way in which they conceptualized the African Diaspora.

As a result of studying African culture, especially African languages, Robeson came to identify himself as an African. Wright, who might be considered a westernized counter-modernist, visited Ghana with the hope of finding an African identity, but he was in some sense repelled by the traditional African culture he observed, as he wrote in *Black Power*. Significantly, therefore, Robeson and Wright's biographies and writings shed light on the ambiguities that are inherent in theorizing the African Diaspora—ambiguities that constitute the discourse of the African Diaspora. As such, this essay addresses the way that those ambiguities can encourage and frustrate the desire to forge links between Blacks in Africa and in America.

### **Robeson, The Council on African Affairs, and Anti-Colonial Politics**

Paul Robeson's pride in Black American culture and identification with African culture began at a relatively early age. His father, an escaped slave of Igbo heritage, together with the Princeton Black community, strongly inspired and shaped Robeson's

identity as a Black man. In the midst of segregated Princeton, the Black community of ex-slaves introduced Robeson to an appreciation of African culture through their performance of spirituals. This reality served as a foundation for his later desire formally to study African cultures, particular West African languages, while living in London, England, during the 1930's. Hence, it was at the London School of Oriental Languages that Robeson came to understand and value of African cultures; it also was in London that he gained an appreciation of African nationalism. These experiences shaped his personal development and political consciousness, leading him to conclude that African peoples should be free of European imperialism and colonialism (Duberman 1988; Robeson 1958; Robeson Jr. 2001).

As his pride in and knowledge of Africa grew, and as he met African nationalists and intellectuals in London, Robeson saw it as his responsibility to speak out publicly against the oppression and exploitation of Africans. Moreover, he and others linked imperialism, colonialism, and white supremacy, pointing out that the dehumanization and humiliation of Black Americans, Asians, and even ethnic Russians were generated by the same global system of domination. It was in this way that he began to call for the revolutionary overthrow of global white supremacy and the implementation of scientific socialism and popular democracy on a world scale. This was the context in which Robeson, together with other leading Black creative intellectuals, set in motion the development of an organization they employed to engineer an African Diaspora anticolonial movement (Robeson 1958; Stuckey 1987).

Moreover, in the face of the racist humiliation and degradation of Black Americans—one that portrayed them as a class of sub-humanity—Robeson and others sought to project a new cultural image by encouraging a progressive Black nationalist consciousness that had its foundation in the value of African cultural nationalism. Hence, Robeson early on linked Black American cultural nationalism with African cultural nationalism. In this regard, Sterling Stuckey argues: “His most daring intellectual achievement, however, was in positing the fundamental Africanness of black culture in America...” (Stuckey 1987: 352). For Robeson, progressive Black nationalism had to be guided by scientific socialism, which was the revolutionary theory and practice that was energizing anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles around the world (Robeson 1958).

By the late 1930's, Robeson returned to the United States and helped to found an organization that would give expression to an African Diaspora politics designed to liberate Africa from colonial domination. As Penny Von Eschen recounts in her important study, *Race Against Empire* (1997), the engine driving that effort was the Council on African Affairs (CAA), which emerged from the 1942 reorganization of the International Committee on African Affairs (ICAA). Established with the assistance of Robeson in 1937, under the leadership Max Yergan, a Black American leftist from Raleigh, North Carolina, the ICAA mainly was an educational organization, comprised of leading Black educators, lawyers, and artists such as Mordecai Johnson, Ralph Bunche, and the Paris-based but Martinique-born intellectual Rene Maran. ICAA's mission was to inform the American public about Africa. In the same year Ralph Bunche introduced Yergan to several African and Caribbean intellectual warriors in London, including Jomo Kenyatta (the future president of independent Kenya), George Padmore (the Caribbean Pan-Africanist), and I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson (the Sierra Leonean trade unionist and journalist). However, Yergan's membership in the Communist Party and later assumption of the leadership of the National Negro Congress de-emphasized his involvement in the ICAA and resulted in numerous resignations from the ICAA (Von Eschen 1997).

Under the leadership of Paul Robeson, the Council on African Affairs maintained and interest in educating Americans about Africa; however, the new organization took on increasingly on goals of African independence and socioeconomic development. The CAA's leadership sought to achieve these goals not only through education, but also by organizing broad political support for African independence and lobbying the U. S. government on behalf of African interests (Von Eschen 1997).

Significantly, the Council on African Affairs represented a radical and unambiguous Diaspora consciousness, accompanied by a distinct shift to autonomous Black leadership. Adopting an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist politics, the CAA maintained that its struggle for Black rights was linked inseparably with the liberation movements being waged by the people of the Caribbean and Africa and the colonial world in general. In 1943, the appointment of Marxist and Howard University professor Alphaeus Hunton as the CAA's educational director indicated a major turning point in his

life and in the life of the organization. Thereafter, Hunton carried out the day-to-day operations of the organization, as Paul and Eslanda Robeson became even more involved. Moreover, there were other new and active members, including Mary McCloud Bethune and the progressive Howard University sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. They were joined by Charlotta Bass, a participant in the 1919 Pan-African Congress in Paris, a civil rights activist, a promoter of the West Coast “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign, and editor and publisher of the *California Eagle*, the state’s oldest Black newspaper (Von Eschen 1997).

Given the cultural and intellectual leadership of Robeson, Yergan, Du Bois, and Hunton, the Council on African Affairs was a formidable and well-respected organization among Black Americans. Broad sectors of the Black American populations supported the CAA’s internationalist political agenda: the demand to end colonialism and imperialism in Africa. Linking international movement politics and Black popular culture, the CAA held political rallies and fundraisers that attracted crowds, which came to see such Black popular artists as Marian Anderson, Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, and Robeson (Von Eschen 1997).

However, although the CAA reached its zenith during the early 1940’s, World War II and its aftermath set in motion the demise of the organization and the decline and disappearance of African Diaspora politics. Internal contradictions and external pressures began to take their toll on the CAA. By 1948, the climate of Cold War politics and anti-Communist hysteria undercut the CAA’s anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist politics, as Black liberals and radicals split over the war effort and Communists within CAA. The complex confrontational politics of Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, which set in motion the domestic and international crisis of the Cold War, resulted in the governmental assault on radical cultural workers and creative intellectuals in America. As the arm of an increasingly repressive state, the new Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which was created in 1947 as a peacetime intelligence organization, engaged in a cultural war against supposed intellectual enemies of the state. The “Company,” as the CIA came to be known, infiltrated every aspect of American intellectual and cultural life, conducting a secret campaign that undermined democratic freedoms and radical political activism (Borstelmann 2001; Offner 2002; Saunders 1999;



Von Eschen 1997). Significantly, these developments spelled the death knell of progressive Black internationalist political dynamics. By the 1950s, America was caught in the throes of the fascist McCarthy era, which resulted in the crackdown on radical intellectual warriors, such as Robeson and Du Bois (Polsgrove 2001).

### **In It but not of It: Richard Wright, Freedom, and the Search for Modern Africa**

Richard Wright's early life experiences with extreme poverty and anti-Black racism in the American South shaped his proletarian world-view. The violent, racist, and impoverished circumstances of Wright's upbringing in the old segregated South made him search desperately to find out whether Black men could live with personal worth and human dignity and without fear in a world dominated by white male power (Rowley 2001; Wright 1945; Webb 1968). Wright's own complex consciousness, while strongly influenced by modern rationalism, also made him fascinated by the irrational aspects of life. He wanted to find out if Black men could be or become psychologically free of their white oppressors. Accordingly, Wright believed that the Black creative intellectual had a strong responsibility to contest white power's conception of existence and, in the process, to assert the validity and complexity of the Black experience. In his 1937 article, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright argued:

The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary; a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and moulds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today (Gayle 1970: 320-321).

Perhaps Richard Wright's novel of ideas, *The Outsider* (1953), is his most sustained and compelling inquiry into the question of the possibility and quality of Black male freedom in an anti-Black American world. Wright also is concerned with the issue of power and the knowledge that buttresses its performance. Ultimately, he constructs the image of a self-possessed Black man, who is fearless, knowledgeable, and courageous. Untamed by the culture of modern society, he is an intellectually

authoritative existential-nihilist—a rebel-criminal who creates and tries to live by his own social rules (Hayes 1997). Significantly, to counteract prevailing literary notions of the Black man as ignorant and submissive, Wright was engaged in creating a new conception of the Black man. Finally, *The Outsider* represents Wright's disillusionment with the Communist Party and with the possibility of racial justice in America.

*The Outsider* is the story of Cross Damon, a disillusioned Black man in Chicago, who takes the opportunity of a train crash that he is involved in to change his identity and disappear in the attempt to refashion his life. In New York, under several assumed identities, he encounters both Communists and a segregationist. Knowing and seeing the world from the standpoint of a new freedom derived from his outsider consciousness—a double vision that accompanies his will to break all of the rules of modern civil society—Damon develops the cynical view about human life and the will to power.

Damon's knowledgeable double vision puts him in possession of the double lies of the Communist Party nihilists' will to power. Employing a critical Marxian analysis of capitalist industrialization, Damon mocks the Communists' quest for power, suggesting that they are similar to Western imperialists. Intellectually powerful, he sees through and challenges the ideological duplicity of his Communist Party adversaries. In one exchange, he declares authoritatively:

"I'm propaganda-proof. Communism has two truths, two faces. The face you're talking about now is for the workers, for the public, not for me. I look at facts, processes.... You did what you did because you had to! Anybody who launches himself on the road to naked power is caught in a trap.... You use idealistic words as your smoke screen, but behind that screen you *rule*.... It's a question of *power*" (Wright 1953: 354-355).

In some sense, Damon sees both Communists and the racist segregationist, Langley Herndon, as existential-nihilists, who, like himself, understand the meaninglessness of human existence. Their exercise of power seeks to fill the emptiness of human life. Damon concludes that it is this awareness of the character of human existence, as nothing in particular, that allows both Communists and segregationist to wield power with such evil dexterity. Finding the cynicism of these petty nihilists reprehensible, Damon kills Herndon, the southern racist, and Blount, the Communist.

Ultimately responsible for four murders and one suicide, Damon, ironically, is forced to confront his own arbitrary and cynical exercise of power. Wright portrays Damon as an ethical criminal, a rebel outsider who sees the system of legal justice as a veil of illusion. Finding no real justice in this system, Damon breaks the rules of civil society and creates his own principles by which he will try to live. However, in doing so, Wright seems to be suggesting, Damon emerges very much like the petty gods whom he despises.

The rebel-outsider Cross Damon is the product of Wright's own urgent obligation to speak on behalf of the Black masses deprived of public speech, to witness to their living. Indeed, Wright saw himself as an intellectual warrior, belonging on the side of the dispossessed, weak, unwanted, and resentful victims of modern Western civilization. The words that Wright had Damon hurl at his adversaries about the horror of modern life, his critique of Western ideology and culture, constitute a critique that emerges from Black people's special history in the modern world. For Wright, that critique developed during chattel slavery and positioned itself at the core of a field where the underside of modernity, capitalism, industrialization, and democracy intersected disproportionately. Like double vision, Damon's critique represents the product of Black people's turbulent voyage—of dislocation from Africa, relocation to the Americas, and isolation on slave plantations—from racial slavery to racial segregation, from the rural south to the urban north. Through Damon, Wright expressed their predicament, as well as their hopes and aspirations.

Like many other Black Americans who concluded that America was beyond redemption with respect to racial justice, Richard Wright chose exile in the 1950s. Living in France allowed him to interact not only with French intellectuals, but also with other intellectual warriors of the African Diaspora. In this way, Wright's stature as an international creative intellectual was established. While his earlier novels spoke on behalf of poor and racially exploited Black Americans, Wright broadened the scope of his concern to include African and Asian elites in his non-fictional writings. Employing some of the same themes, especially the expression "in it but not of it" to describe the position of Blacks in the capitalist and anti-Black world, Wright sought to understand the crisis of Third World elites as the victims of modern Western civilization. Maintaining and yet going beyond some of the themes addressed in *The Outsider*, *Black Power* (1954)

and *White Man, Listen!* (1957) can be viewed as Wright's intellectual discovery and critical examination of the Third World.

The continuity of theme between Wright's fictional and later non-fictional writing is evident in the opening paragraph of "The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People," the first essay in *White Man, Listen!* It is here that Wright indicts the modern West for crimes against African and Asian humanity. He declares:

Buttressed by their belief that their God had entrusted the earth into their keeping, drunk with power and possibility, waxing rich through trade in commodities, human and non-human, with awesome naval and merchant marines at their disposal, their countries filled with human debris anxious for any adventures, psychologically armed with new facts, white western Christian civilization during the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, with a long, slow, and bloody explosion, hurled itself upon the sprawling masses of colored humanity in Asia and Africa.... For the West to disclaim responsibility for what it so clearly did is to make every white man alive on earth today a criminal (Wright 1957/1995: 1, 3).

Like Cross Damon, the Westernized and tragic elites of the Third World are outsiders who exist ambiguously on the margins of many cultures. They are individuals, who, like Wright himself, are the victims of the West. Having traveled to and studied in European nations, African and Asian elites are in modern Western culture, but not of that culture. They are caught precariously between two worlds. Hence, Wright refers to them as the "Westernized and tragic elite," to whom he dedicates *White Man, Listen!*

Cross Damon's outsider perspective puts him in possession of his racist-capitalist-socialist oppressor's duplicitous knowledge and, thus, gives him the intellectual power that makes him propaganda-proof. Similarly, Wright characterizes the Westernized and tragic elites of Africa and Asia as outsiders of the modern West. Yet, because they have traveled and studied in modern Western societies, their minds have been colonized by the West, resulting in alienation from their own indigenous cultures and from Western culture. Yet, their marginal existence as Westernized and tragic elites

becomes the source not only of knowledge, but also of political action in the monumental struggle to overturn Europe's colonization of African and Asian nations (Shankar 2001)..

As an alienated Westernized Black American who was living in France, Wright saw himself linked to the ideological expatriates of the Third World. In the West but not of the West, Wright does not feel intellectually or emotionally damaged by the West. His life experiences as an outsider have shaped his alienated consciousness. He is a cultural nomad, a homeless man, feeling a certain indifference to Western civilization because Wright holds the view that human existence possesses little meaning. In the introduction to *White Man, Listen*, Wright asserts:

I'm a rootless man, but I'm neither psychologically distraught nor in any wise particularly perturbed because of it. Personally, I do not hanker after, and seem not to need, as many emotional attachments, sustaining roots, or idealistic allegiances as most people. I declare unabashedly that I like and even cherish the state of abandonment, of aloneness; it does not bother me; indeed, to me it seems the natural, inevitable condition of man, and I welcome it. I can make myself at home almost anywhere on this earth and can, if I've a mind to and when I'm attracted to a landscape or a mood of life, easily sink myself into the most alien and widely differing environments. I must confess that this is no personal achievement of mine; this attribute was never striven for....I've been shaped to this mental stance by the kind of experiences that I have fallen heir to (1957/1995: xxiii-xxiv).

Though he has chosen to live as an expatriate in Paris, and though his uprooted life experiences may be unsettling and contentious, Wright is not silenced by these conditions. Drawing on his critical intellectual and literary skills, he is able to investigate the underside of modern Western colonialism, finding in the allegory of exile the discursive field on which to articulate an anti-colonial politics. Throughout the age of Western colonialism a rigid division existed between the European colonizers and their African and Asian colonized peoples. Here was a division which, although millions of transactions were permitted across it, was given a cultural correlative of extraordinary proportions, since in essence it maintained a strict social and cultural hierarchy between

whites and non-whites, between members of the dominant and members of the subject peoples. It was this asymmetry in power that Fanon was later to characterize as the Manicheanism of colonial rule in his classic work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). As an expatriate from white supremacist America, Wright identifies with the ideological condition of the Third World's colonized tragic elites. This is so because Wright, too, exists, in some significant respects, outside the limits of Western culture. He is a Western man, but white supremacy prevents him from living fully as a free man. Therefore, he and the Westernized and tragic Third World elites are in Western civilization, but they are not of it.

As a self-exiled Black American in Paris from 1946 to his death in 1960, Wright developed friendships with an assortment of French, African, and Caribbean intellectual activist. His speeches, writing, and associations with other exiled Black Americans also made him a focus of intellectual attention. Moreover, he became a target of Cold War politics and was a marked man by the CIA (Fabre 1973; Saunders 1999). Under these circumstances, Wright had become a well-known and respected international Black creative intellectual and culture critic; he remained skeptical and always on guard. He had resigned from the Communist Party USA. He had participated in the historic 1955 Bandung Conference on Third World development. Wright had traveled to Latin America. At the suggestion of the Pan-Africanist Dorothy Padmore, Wright also had visited the British West African colony of the Gold Coast that later become the nation of Ghana upon independence (Fabre 1973; Wright 1953/1995). It was there that Wright gathered material for his book, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (1954). Although this represented a shift away from fiction and an American setting, *Black Power* demonstrated Wright's outsider gaze. A courageous undertaking, the book is as much a self-portrait of Wright's own cultural ambivalence as it is an ethnographic examination of colonial political culture and its contradictions in Africa.

In *Black Power* Wright offers a political psychology of identity as he grapples with the significance of his relationship with African culture. Although of African descent, Wright does not feel at home racially in Africa; he remains an outsider, a rootless man. He approaches Africa as a modern, rational Black man of the West, whom white supremacy and anti-Black racism has pushed to the margins of human significance

and existence; as Wright would say of his location in Western culture, he was “in it but not of it.” As a result, Wright developed and maintained the political consciousness of a cultural stranger. He was in the land of his ancestors with whom he desperately wanted to identify, but he found that his skin color and even much of what he had read about Africa, inadequately prepared him to comprehend the realities of traditional African culture, especially the significance of traditional religion. If, as an agnostic, Wright considered all forms religion to be irrational, he viewed traditional African religions as utterly primitive. Comparing aspects of traditional African culture with his remembrances of Black culture in the American South, Wright was unable to appreciate the cultural dynamics of his ancestors. Indeed, in his constant search for meaningful connection between traditional Africans and himself, Wright was disappointed. Indeed, he was shocked and awed by the nudity of Black bodies, traditional living conditions, and African dance. It was his outsider perspective, as a rootless man, that Wright had tried to situate in an attempt to interrogate the essential meaning and relationship between Africans and himself, and between Africa and the West. He saw himself as a lost son of Africa, seeking to return to the land of his ancestors. Yet, the only connection he could find between Africa and himself as a Black American was that based upon common oppression and suffering caused by the West. Based strictly upon race, then, Wright was not African!

Perhaps it is accurate to characterize Wright as a Black counter-modernist, because he disavowed the rigidity and absolutism of modernism’s either/or mindset at all costs. That is, although he could not see himself as an African, Wright was not anti-African. Indeed, in *Black Power*, Wright hoped that in an increasingly interconnected world in which modern culture was shaping the life experiences of humanity, all of Africa would become independent, industrialized, and modernized Africa. All of Africa would have to overthrow the cultural, political, and economic legacy of European colonialism. This was the actual focus of Wright’s criticism in *Black Power*. It was not enough that the Africans of the Gold Coast, led by the nationalist Kwame Nkrumah, were seizing the dream of independence. According to Wright, West Africans would also have to liberate themselves from the power of traditional religions and chiefs that psychologically barred them entering the modern world. To be sure, *Black Power* was

not an indictment of Africa; rather, he castigated the vestiges of Western European colonialism.

In the concluding chapter of *Black Power*, Wright offers advice, in the form of a letter to soon-to-be Ghanaian Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah, that he hoped would help Africans prepare themselves to become actors on the modern world's stage. Wright makes the controversial declaration: "There is but one honorable course that assumes and answers the ideological, traditional, organizational, emotional, political, and productive needs of Africa at this time: AFRICAN LIFE MUST BE MILITARIZED" (1953/1995: 389). Many who read the book thought that Wright was calling for the kind of militarism in Africa that characterized the former totalitarian regime of fascist Germany or Italy. But that was not Wright's intent.

Challenging the view that Wright advocated a militaristic fascism for Africa, literary scholar Manthia Diawara (1998) has argued for an alternative interpretation. According to Diawara, Wright was calling for African societies to become disciplined and organized. Diawara pointed that both the French words *militaire* and *militant* have the same Latin root, *militis*, which means disciplined and committed to an ideal, ready to fight for a cause. In the days of the Cold War militarized also meant order, inner organization of the personality, punctuality, solidarity, focus, perseverance, and honor in struggle. Unfortunately, some African rulers like Mobutu and Idi Amin have given militarization a bad name by linking it to disorder, dictatorship, and oppression. According to Diawara, however, "militarization in Africa signifies nationalism, with the masses as the basis of political power. To militarize means to make every African a soldier for Pan-Africanism (1998: 70).

Diawara noted that Wright reasoned that militarization was Africa's shortest pathway to modernity; it was this kind of discipline and organization that would help to free Africans from traditional religions and rulers. In *Black Power*, Wright indicted the British imperialists and colonialists for the manner in which they exploited and oppressed African peoples, preventing the industrial development of Africans by withholding modern technology. Wright also criticized the West for using Christianity in order to coerce Africans to submit to barbaric treatment of Europeans, who perpetrated the crimes of extracting Africa's gold and diamonds. For Wright, this was a betrayal of the



European sense of justice. Although Western Europe had pretentiously encouraged Africans to embrace a sense of freedom and justice, Wright concluded that the West had, in reality, engaged in the practice of racism and capitalist greed in toward colonized Africans. Hence, Wright's anger was not directed at Africa and Africans. Rather, he hurled his protests against the British, the Americans, the French, and the Germans, who constructed the racial contract and maintained racist categories in order to entertain themselves at the expense of Africans (Diawara 1998; Mills 1997).

Wright reserved much of his energy and written argument for the liberation of Africans from traditional systems of thought that erected barriers between them and the modern world. In the 1950s, Wright had argued that traditional African belief systems were major handicap to the advancement of modernity in Africa. For Wright, all of African culture was submerged under the deep sea of traditional religions. Similarly, the colonial imposition of Western Christianity and its missionary systems stood in the way of secular democratic institutional practices, the liberation of women, and the rise of the individual. For him, the complicity between traditional African religion and Western Christianity was the deadliest weapon against secular rule and democratic socialism.

Diawara praised *Black Power* as a courageous book because Wright dared to engage in an honest discussion about the relationship between Africans and Black Americans. Few thinkers previously had undertaken this kind of dialogue. Rejecting racial consciousness as the basis for African and Black American solidarity and identity, Wright argued that the basis of this solidarity should be the struggle for the liberation of oppressed people throughout the world. According the Wright, this quest for liberation beyond racial connections became necessary because white supremacy and anti-Black racism had thrown together all Black people, hindering them from forging their own individual identities. Wright stated that he regretted being a man of the West, because that culture had abdicated its most important political cultural weapon—the universal quest for justice. The West had selfishly secured freedom and justice only for itself! For Wright, culture was not a permanent thing; rather, cultural change and development were bound to the group's passage to modernity. *Black Power* was a controversial book, but one thing is clear; Wright supported African modernization. He wanted a secularized, modernized, and industrialized Africa, if for no other reason than, he believed, modernity

and industrialization are the best post-metaphysical weapons against the evil of white supremacy. He wanted West Africans in Ghana to break away from their traditions because the alienated man is not only one who hates the West, but also one who wants to be like the West, free like Western man to be an individual, to control his own destiny. *Black Power* is perhaps a harsh statement, but one of the most important books written on the modern transformation of Africa. Today, with Afro-nihilism growing worldwide, Wright's *Black Power* was one of the first books to warn against the pitfalls of nationalism, ethnic chauvinism, and religious fundamentalism in Africa. And he wrote well before Frantz Fanon made the same warning years later in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963).

## **Conclusion**

What is the meaning of Africa to Black Americans? What connections do Black Americans have with Africa? This paper suggests that there is no single and simple answer to these questions. The issues are too complex and complicated. Even the figures of Paul Robeson and Richard Wright offer different perspectives. What is clear is that Cornel West's criticism of early creative intellectuals seems too severe. As this paper tries to demonstrate, Robeson and Wright, as early intellectual warriors, had to project a new cultural image of Black people in a white supremacist and anti-Black world that constructed Black people as a class of sub-humanity. In the process, they were confronted with intellectual, existential, and political challenges as they dealt with the meaning of blackness in anti-Black America and throughout the Western world. Finally, as targets of America's fascist Cold War and McCarthyism, Robeson and Wright, like other Black American (and Caribbean) creative intellectuals, sought to define the meaning of Africa to themselves and to others.

As this paper has demonstrated, Robeson and Wright took different intellectual paths. Robeson embraced progressive Black Nationalism, studied African culture closely, and came to identify himself as an African. Moreover, he joined others in establishing an organization, the Council on African Affairs. The CAA linked racism in America to colonialism in Africa and engaged in an internationalist African Diaspora

politics, which was designed to free the global African world from clutches of imperialism, colonialism, and racism.

As one who saw himself as a Black man of modern Western civilization, Richard Wright also knew that racism had not allowed him, or other Black people, actually to enjoy the full meaning of modern Western culture. By using the phrase, “in it but not of it,” Wright captured his own sense of homelessness and rootlessness to characterize his existence as a modern Westernized Black man. He also employed this outsider consciousness as a lens with which to analyze the existential condition of all Third World elites who were caught in the cauldron of Western civilization’s white supremacy. This experience of being simultaneously inside and outside of American culture produced Wright’s third force or view of the world. He had been a member of the American Communist Party, but he had resigned, even as he maintained a Marxian analysis of modern society. He came to see that Communists, like segregationists, were petty power wielders, interested in manipulating the people for their own interests. He spelled out this indictment in his novel of ideas, *The Outsider*.

Although Robeson remained optimistic about America, Wright left America, believing that white supremacy rendered the nation beyond redemption. While exiled in France, Wright gained an interest in Africa. Going to pre-independent Ghana as a Westernized Black man, Wright had an ambivalent adventure. Once again, he found himself both inside and outside of traditional African civilization. Unswervingly in favor of a modern, secular Africa, Wright severely criticized traditional African religions, belief systems, and leadership. He saw them as barriers to modernization and industrialization, which would be major weapons against white supremacy and exploitation in Africa. In the final analysis, Wright could not identify with Africa based upon a common racial heritage as a Black man, but he did identify with Africa based upon a cultural history of common suffering and exploitation by the West. This again was Wright’s third way of viewing social reality.

Perhaps a similarity between Paul Robeson and Richard Wright was the hope that America and the Western world ultimately would get past their traditions of economic exploitation and racial/cultural chauvinism, which would allow new Third World nations to step onto the world stage of modern history. But history moves and a thing can

become its opposite. The West failed to relinquish its economic control of Africa; the results are predictable. Evident today is not a bright and morning star of modern African advancement, but a stalled and disillusioned moment in postcolonial African history that is characterized by authoritarian rule, violence, and corruption (Mamdani 1996; 2001). The language of fear and resentment now dominates African landscapes, forcing many Africans to become immigrants to the United States of America. Constituting the latest manifestation of the African Diaspora, a new generation of Africans is coming to America in search of the utopian “American Dream.” Although their passage to America does not involve the trauma of chains, slave ships, starvation, and genocide, which characterized the turbulent voyage of their once enslaved native Black American cousins, the new “African” Americans eventually will discover a stillborn democracy in America. The circumstances and practices of white supremacy might change, but the principle of racial chauvinism in America seems permanent. Ultimately, Wright was correct to conclude that America was beyond redemption.

If religious traditionalism barred modern democratic development in Africa, as Wright argued pervasively, it certainly is apparent that the contemporary wave of religious fundamentalism in America and the Middle East will have the same effect. As religious fundamentalism—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—increasingly grips the United States of America, Israel, and the Arab-Muslim world, the coming trajectory may not be a new-world order of continued human progress, but a new-world disorder of barbarism and human destruction. Although Wright might have thought otherwise, the contemporary revival of religious fundamentalism in the United States of America and in the Middle East points out that the spirit of modernity does not spell the death knell of traditional religious exuberance (see Ali 2002; Mamdani 2004; Morone 2003). Today, long after the end of the Cold War with its fascist tendencies in America and in Western Europe, the reemergence of religious fundamentalism(s) in America, Israel, and throughout the Arab-Muslim world may represent the biggest threat to democracy, individual freedom, progressive economic development, and human advancement. Locked in an imperialist and religious fundamentalist war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the current militaristic and power-hungry political leadership of the American Empire often

sounds as if fascism is just around the corner (Boggs 2005; Johnson 2004; Johnson 2005).

Paul Robeson and Richard Wright would agree. We live in tragic times—in an age of disaster, disbelief, and resentment.

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